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Donald V. Hammond
Fiscal Assistant Secretary
Office of the Fiscal Assistant Secretary
US Department of Treasury, Room 2112
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington DC 20220

Dear Mr. Hammond:

On behalf of the North Carolina Fair Housing Center (NCFHC), I am writing to strongly oppose any involvement of check cashiers, pawn shops, and other non-federally insured institutions in the EFT (Electronic Funds Transfer) program. This includes so-called voluntary accounts outside of the ETA (Electronic Transfer Account) option.

NCFHC believes strongly that EFT could benefit working class and minority individuals and communities if it encourages a number of "unbanked" individuals to establish accounts with banks or thrifts. These business relationships could lead to more home and small business lending in traditionally minority communities.

However, if check cashiers and other non-federally insured institutions participate in the EFT program, NCFHC believes that the "unbanked" population receiving EFT will be pushed further away from mainstream financial institutions. According to the Treasury Department, the existing arrangements between banks and non-depository "payment service providers" require recipients of federal benefits and wages to use the offices of the payment service providers instead of the offices of the banks. These EFT recipients cannot establish relationships with tellers and other bank personnel that may lead to the opening of checking and savings accounts.

The voluntary, non-ETA accounts offered by check cashiers and other payment service providers violate the mandate of the Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996. The Act requires that the Treasury Department ensures that individuals receiving electronic payments have accounts at reasonable cost and with the same consumer protections as other account holders at depository institutions.

Treasury's descriptions of arrangements between banks and check cashiers and other payment providers include examples of non-ETA accounts that would not be federally-insured. Therefore, some customers of a particular bank would have federal insurance protection if they had their government checks directly deposited into the bank. Other customers of the same bank, in contrast, would not have FDIC-insurance protection if they receive government payments through a check cashier that has an arrangement with the bank. It is very likely that the first customer receiving direct deposit from the bank would be relatively affluent while the second consumer using a check cashier would be low- or moderate-income income and residing in a minority community. If Treasury permits fringe banker participation in EFT, many low- and moderate-income members of the "unbanked" population would be subject to usurious interest rates and fees of check cashiers and pay day lenders that range from 50 to 500 percent annually. The Treasury Department, in its request for comments, documents that existing arrangements between banks and third party payment providers include a \$4 enrollment fee, a \$5.50 monthly maintenance fee, and a \$1 fee for each withdrawal or balance inquiry. This is more than three times the monthly fee of \$3 proposed by Treasury for the basic ETA account to be offered by banks and thrifts. This is providing unequal access in what I believe is a potentially discriminatory way.

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An EFT system allowing fringe bankers will result in a wealth-drain from minority communities. The small savings that members of the unbanked population have been able to accumulate will be sucked away by the unsavory practices of pay day lenders, check cashiers, and other predatory actors in the fringe banking world. This would eat away at the progress in reinvestment policies stimulated by CRA and the nation's fair lending laws.

Fringe bankers do not need the federal government's help in grabbing market share in minority and working class communities. Several studies have documented that check cashiers already dominate in minority neighborhoods.

For example, Greg Squires and Sally O' Connor of the University of Wisconsin find that banks outnumber check cashiers 15 to 1 in white neighborhoods in Milwaukee. In contrast, there was one bank for every check cashier in African-American neighborhoods. Breaking down the data further by income and race reveals even more glaring disparities. The Woodstock Institute found that check cashiers outnumber banks by ratios higher than 10 to 1 in lower income, minority communities in Chicago.

The Treasury Department should be employing every policy tool at its disposal to reverse the higher market presence of check cashing outlets. If Treasury provides non-federally insured institutions with access to a captive market of millions of unbanked recipients of federal benefits and wages, the market penetration of check cashiers in minority neighborhoods will truly dwarf that of banks and thrifts. In contrast, if Treasury restricts EFT to federally-insured institutions, banks and thrifts can begin to regain market share in traditionally minority neighborhoods.

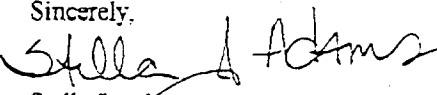
A recent New York Times article suggests that banks need to be encouraged to increase their presence in low- and moderate-income communities rather than being permitted to enter into arrangements with check cashiers and other payment service providers. The article reports that banks in states with lifeline banking laws have more college students opening up low-cost accounts than lower income customers. Experts are quoted in the article as saying that banks need to step up their marketing efforts to traditionally minority populations. A Treasury regulation prohibiting check cashier and other non-depository institutions from offering the voluntary, non-ETA accounts would indeed encourage banks to increase their marketing to and presence in working class and minority neighborhoods.

Unscrupulous and exploitative practices of pay day lenders, pawn shops check cashiers, subprime lenders, and other non-federally insured institutions have been increasing significantly in the last few years.

Restricting EFT access to banks and thrifts would help curb the excesses of fringe bankers by encouraging banks and thrifts to increase their presence in working class and minority neighborhoods. If the Treasury Department wishes to support the reinvestment stimulated by CRA and the fair lending laws, it needs to prohibit non-federally insured institutions from participating in the EFT system.

Thank you for consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,


Stella J. Adams